DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 862 CG 013 476

AUTHOR Finkelhor, David
TITLE A Survey of Sexual Abuse in the Population at Large: Some Policy Implications.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Mental Health (DHEW), Rockville, Md.
PUB DATE Oct 78
GRANT R01-MH-30939; T32-MH-15161
NOTE 10p.; Best copy available; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 19-22, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Abuse; Children; Child Welfare; *Family Problems; Homosexuality; *Parent Child Relationship; *Rape; *Sexuality

ABSTRACT

Survey information shows that sexual abuse of children is widespread, being reported by 19% of the females and 9% of the males in the sample. Most sexual victimization took place within the child's family, not with strangers, as "child molesters" have traditionally been stereotyped. While the problem cuts across social and economic lines, it seems to be more prevalent in families of lower social class and rural backgrounds, indicating that social isolation may play a key role in victimization and family violence. Mothers are crucial in protecting their daughters from sexual abuse; girls whose mothers were absent, ill, poorly educated or alcoholic were much more likely to be victimized. Children were most vulnerable prior to puberty, and most of them did not reveal the experience to anyone at the time it occurs. Experiences involving force were much more traumatic than those not involving force. (Author/BP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

October 1978 VS4

A Survey of Sexual Abuse in the Population at Large:*

Some Policy Implications

David Finkelhor

Department of Sociology

University of New Hampshire

ED169462

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

David Finkelhor

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CG013476

*I wish to thank Murray Straus for help in various phases of this research. Funds for the support of the study came from NIMH grants T32-MH15161 and R01-MH30939. A lengthier report of this study will be published soon under the title, Sexually Victimized Children (Free Press).

Within the last several years, child protective workers, physicians and psychotherapists say they are seeing a mushrooming number of victims of childhood sexual abuse, both children who are current victims and adults who are reporting such experiences retrospectively. Our knowledge about the problem, although not increasing as fast as their caseloads, is advancing, too.

Almost all that knowledge about the problem, however, comes from cases that have been reported to social agencies or victims who have revealed their experience in counseling. But we can be virtually certain that these cases represent only a small fraction of the real number of victims, while the experiences of most victims (probably near 90% or more of the total) are never reported or revealed. We need to know much more about the sexual abuse experiences that are not reported as well as those that are.

In an attempt to get information on sexual victimization experiences in a non-treatment population, I undertook a survey of 795 college undergraduates at 6 New England colleges and universities. Students in a variety of social science courses filled out questionnaires about childhood sexual experiences. Although the sample is not representative of any larger population, it is quite diverse in terms of the religious, ethnic, social class and urban-rural background of the students (with the exception of there being very few blacks) and in terms of the types of schools included. Participation rate was very high; over 90% of the students in attendance in the classes filled out the questionnaire.

Sexual victimization was defined as a sexual experience between a child and a much older person: specifically a child under 12 with a partner at least five years older, or a young adolescent 13-16 with an adult at least 10 years older. The "sexual" experiences included in the tally ranged from intercourse, oral-genital contact to exhibitionism and fondling. In the most frequent instance, accounting for 40% of the cases, the older partner touched or manipulated the child's genitals or the child touched the partner's.

Here are some of the findings of the survey together with some of their implications for a public policy aimed at dealing with child sexual abuse.

CHILD SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION IS WIDESPREAD

First, the study confirms the current assessment of this problem coming out of clinical experience: the sexual victimization of children is widespread. Nineteen per cent of the women reported that they had had such an experience as a child. These experiences occurred at all ages; they were not uncommon even as early as four years. They also cut across all social class lines, and all ethnic groups. Almost one in five had a sexual encounter as a child with a much older person. With an incidence like this it is clear that much as we need to try and reduce the high level of this phenomenon, we also need to prepare children much better and much earlier for the possibility that this might happen.

A second, more surprising finding, was that a large number of boys were also sexually victimized. Nine per cent of the men had had an experience with an older person similar to those we have been describing for women. This is about half the rate for women, and a surprise because, judging only from clinical reports, girl victims would appear to outnumber boys 9 to 1 or worse (De Francis, 1969). Our findings suggest that many more boys are sexually victimized than would appear on the basis of clinical reports alone.

The boys' experiences are primarily homosexual, meaning that like the girls' experiences they are almost all with older men. Women, it is confirmed by our study, rarely make sexual advances toward children. All told, the boys' experiences resemble very much the girls', except that the boys are somewhat less traumatized by them and even less apt to tell anyone about them.

The implication of this finding is that we need to pay more attention to the problem of victimized boys (Swift, 1977). Professionals need to be alerted to the possibility that it occurs, because as we found out with the sexual abuse of girls, a problem can go undetected for years because no one is looking for it. And it needs more study, because currently almost everything we know about sexual abuse concerns the victimization of girls. The victimization of boys is a new problem area.

SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION IS A FAMILY PROBLEM

A third conclusion of the study is that sexual victimization is very much a family problem. We found, as clinical studies have found (Benward and Densen-Gerber, 1975; Burgess et al., 1977; De Francis, 1969; Queen's Bench, 1976; Peters, 1976; Weiss, 1955), that most sexual victimization takes place within a child's intimate social network, not with strangers, as "child molesters" have conventionally been stereotyped. Seventy-five per cent of the experiences reported were with older persons known to the child. Forty-four per cent were with actual family members, including uncles, grandfathers, brothers-in-law, fathers and brothers. Twenty-two per cent were within the nuclear family, and six per cent were with fathers and stepfathers.

Thus the culprits, especially in the case of girls, are right in their families. If we were to extrapolate on the basis of this data, something we are not really entitled to do given the limitations of the sample selection, we would estimate that about nine per cent of all women are sexually victimized by a relative and about one and a half per cent are involved in father-daughter sex.

Some other findings reinforce this view of sexual victimization as a family problem. Even for those girls who were victimized outside of the family, certain family characteristics tended to predict who these girls would be. For example, if they had a stepfather or if their parents had an unhappy marriage (judged from the child's point of view), girls were more likely to be victimized by non-family (as well as family) members. So it is quite likely that a vulnerability for sexual victimization can be created within the family.

The implication here is that sexual victimization needs to be treated in a family context. Policies or intervention aimed at decreasing the incidence of sexual victimization need to be directed to the family.

VULNERABLE FAMILIES

The survey does give us some clues about what kinds of families make children the most vulnerable. To some extent, victims more often came from families of lower social class backgrounds. Also, children who grew up in farm families were much more likely to have been sexually abused. This latter fact points toward the idea, gaining increasing currency in our understanding of physical abuse, that social isolation plays a key role in victimization and family violence.

Some subcultural factors too may play a role in sexual victimization. We found, for example, that boys from Irish American backgrounds had a much higher rate of experiences than the average boy. The Irish in America as a group are characterized by a high degree of sexual repression and sexual segregation (Greeley, 1972), which may explain the finding. It suggests that programs aimed at freeing families from the most intense kinds of sexual repressiveness and anxiety may move in the direction of reducing the incidence of this form of sexual abuse.

MOTHERS

Some of the most important findings of the study concern the mothers of the women who reported sexual victimization experiences. They lead to the conclusion that mothers are crucial in protecting their daughters from sexual abuse. For example, girls who ever lived without their natural mother were three times more vulnerable than the average girl. Or if a girl's mother was frequently ill or poorly educated or alcoholic, she was also much more likely to be victimized.

This suggests that there may be a connection between the oppression of women as wives and the victimization of their daughters. Women who occupy weak and debilitated roles may be inadequate in supervising their daughters. They may not sufficiently educate them about sexual matters. Or perhaps, as victims themselves, they may model victim behavior for their child. There may be an important lesson here for the prevention of sexual victimization of girls. When mothers are more equal partners in marriages, their daughters may be less likely to suffer sexual abuse.

AGE OF VICTIMS

Another important finding of the study is that children appear to be most vulnerable to victimization prior to puberty. The mean age for girls, for example, was 10.2 years. Even experiences in the 4-6 year old bracket were common in our sample. This seems to contradict the popular idea that it is the arrival of puberty in a girl that sparks the attention of a potential sexual abuser (Schechter and Roberge, 1976). It is our impression that physiological development is less important than two other things in making a child vulnerable to victimization. 1) Children become more vulnerable as they become more independent and are out and about on their own. And 2) children, especially girls, become more vulnerable as they begin to experiment with adult sex role behavior, something that happens well before physiological puberty. Because they are inexperienced, they are unprepared for the reactions their behavior may provoke. This is supported by the fact that

victimization seems to decrease after age 12, as children become more skilled in discouraging sexual overtures.

The implication of these findings are important for those who wish to target preventive measures at the age group where children are the most vulnerable. Our findings indicate that the age at which children are currently instructed about sexuality may be much too high. Sex education is usually delayed until early adolescence on the assumption that children have little need for sexual information prior to that. But if many children are vulnerable to sexual advances at early ages prior to puberty, then schools and families may do well to prepare children earlier with information that would allow them to protect themselves more fully from the advances they encounter.

KEEPING IT SECRET

Still another finding of the study conerns how few respondents told anyone about their experiences at the time they occurred. Only 37% of the girls said anything to anybody about what had happened. The boys were even more reticent. As interviewees explained it, many feared that they would be blamed themselves for what had happened. Others were afraid of retaliation by the older partner, and did not believe parents or other authorities could adequately defend them. Considering the reactions many of those who told actually received -- parents who went to pieces or who punished the child or who pretended it hadn't happened -- it is hard to fault the children for refusing to tell. Their behavior probably reflected an accurate assessment of the situation.

What this finding implies is that probably the most serious impediment to reporting is the fact that victims themselves rarely talk about their experiences. Before any children can be helped, they have to be able to tell someone. To encourage that we need a double-pronged effort. 1) A climate must be created where children know they can talk about such experiences and they have some idea of whom they can talk to. 2) Parents and professionals who are going to be the recipients of these confidences have to be comfortable and knowledgeable about the subject, so that their reaction or anticipated reaction is not a deterrent to the child's telling.

SOURCES OF TRAUMA

Finally, parts of this study should be useful to those working with victims and their families in an effort to anticipate and hopefully minimize the traumatic potential of these experiences. Our data indicate that many of the conventional assumptions about what causes trauma as a result of these experiences are wrong.

These assumptions include the beliefs that sexual experiences are more negative if, among other things, they last longer, if they involve a closer rather than more distantly related partner, or if they involve intercourse and more intimate sexual activity (Groth, 1978; McFarland, 1978). From our respondents reports, however, these factors were of minor importance. Longer experiences were not more negative. Father-daughter incest was the most negative, but on the whole, experiences with strangers were as bad as those with relatives. And encounters involving exhibition or fondling were equally as traumatic on the average as ones involving intercourse. One cannot predict how negative an experience was simply from the level of sexual activity.

In the past there has been a certain tendency to discount some experiences as being less serious than others, but considering the results of this survey, this tendency may be erroneous. For example, much research in the field currently focuses almost exclusively on incest as the main problem. Although we found that father-daughter incest was clearly the most traumatic experience, experiences with non-family, were usually as traumatic as experiences with brothers and uncles. More attention needs to be given to the general experience of sexual victimization, rather than merely incest.

One aspect of the experience however, was quite significant in predicting trauma. Experiences involving force were much worse than experiences not involving force.

The finding about force is important because there is at least one school of thought that says that coercive experiences should be less traumatic than non-coercive ones. The reasoning here goes that experiences are more traumatic when children feel they somehow contributed to their own victimization, that it was their fault. When acts are forced on them, they realize that they made no contribution, and they thus feel less guilt in the long run. The data here suggest this theory is wrong. Coercive experiences are more traumatic not less.

There are also some assumptions about the relative vulnerability of older and younger children that need to be questioned. Some feel that younger children are protected because they are naive about the meaning of what has occurred. Others feel that, being so young, they are the

most developmentally vulnerable to trauma. However, on the basis of our respondents reports, neither of these assumptions would appear to be true. There was little difference. Younger children seemed neither to be more protected by their naivete nor more traumatized by their helplessness.

The implication here is that practitioners need to proceed cautiously in making assumptions about the trauma potential of any particular victimization experience. Those that might be thought trivial or inconsequential may have a serious impact. The sources of trauma may not be obvious or predictable.

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions have been drawn so far from the findings presented here, and three of them need to be reiterated. 1) Sexual victimization is widespread, probably more widespread than we imagine. 2) It is very much a family problem and needs to be approached in that way. 3) We all need to be very cautious about the assumptions we make about it, since many of our conventional ones about who is most vulnerable, when and why may be wrong. With a problem so newly researched and so little discussed previously, we have to be prepared for anything.

Finally, two findings about research. 1) It can be done. People are willing to talk about this subject. One can achieve fairly respectable participation rates in studies, and fairly valid and reliable responses from participants. 2) We do need to pay attention to the unreported cases and the undetected victims. The problem is as much theirs as anybody's. We need to be sure, for our own sake as researchers and practitioners and for theirs as victims, that their situation is included in our understanding of the problem.

REFERENCES

Benward, J., and Densen-Gerber, J. Incest as a causative factor in anti-social behavior: an exploratory study. Paper presented at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, February 1975.

Burgess, A. W., Groth, A. N., Holmstrom, L. L., and Sgroi, S. M. Sexual assault of children and adolescents. Lexington: Lexington Books, 1978.

De Francis, V. Protecting the child victim of sex crimes committed by adults. Denver: American Humane Assn., 1969.

Greeley, A. That most distressful nation. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1972.

Groth, N. Guidelines for assessment and management of the offender. In Burgess et al. (Eds.), Sexual assault of children and adolescents. Lexington: Lexington Books, 1978.

McFarland, K. Sexual abuse of children. In J. R. Chapman and M. Gates, (Eds.), The victimization of women. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1978.

Queen's Bench Foundation. Sexual abuse of children. San Francisco: 1563 Clay St, 1976.

Schechter, M. D., and Roberge, L. Sexual exploitation. In R. E. Helfer and C. H. Kempe (Eds.), Child abuse and neglect: the family and the community. Cambridge: Ballinger, 1976.

Swift, C. Sexual victimization of children: An urban mental health center survey. Victimology, 1977, 2, 322-327.

Weiss, J., Rogers, E., Darwin, M., and Dutton, C. A study of girl sex victims. Psychiatric Quarterly, 1955, 29(1), 1-27.